

# 'I was in prison and you came to me': Belleville minister brings message of hope to inmates

By TERI MADDUX News-Democrat September 7, 2014



*Attendees pray while at a Sunday church service at Menard Correctional Center in Chester, Illinois. Photo by STEVE NAGY/BND*

Thirty men stood in a double line in the prison courtyard, all dressed in blue shirts and navy pants, most carrying Bibles.

They waited for a guard to tell them they could go to church.

"We look forward to this," said Stacy Stevenson, 37, of Belleville, who has spent the past six months in the medium-security unit of Menard Correctional Center in Chester. "Even though we're in prison, this is one of the positive things that we can take with us when we leave."

Stacy was a college student and owner of a heating and cooling company when he was sentenced to two years after his third DUI charge. He expects release by the end of the year after serving 10 months.

Stacy is one of the regulars at Menard's Sunday morning services. The inmates listen to sermons, read Bible verses, pray and sing for about an hour. Some stand up and give personal testimony.

"Sitting in that cell all day, sometimes this is the most exciting thing we got," Stacy said.

## **Biblical duty**

Area ministers volunteer to lead non-denominational services at Menard, which houses about 3,800 inmates. On this day, it was the Rev. Frank Wagner, a Granite City steelworker and former pastor of Bible Baptist Church in Washington Park.

He's been a prison minister off and on for more than 30 years.

"It's Biblical," said Wagner, 62, of Belleville. "The Bible says people should visit the poor and the captive, those who are in prison. The church has a vital role in sharing Christ with prisoners."

The "chapel" in medium security is a classroom with white concrete-block walls, fluorescent lights, a lectern and rows of plastic folding chairs.

Reality isn't far away. Windows overlook the courtyard, surrounded by a double chain-link fence with barbed-wire coils.

Wagner stands out from the congregation in his wool suit, collarless silk shirt and dress shoes, but he tries to maintain a welcoming atmosphere. Services start with a round of applause.

"He teaches without prejudice and without judgment toward any of us," said inmate Scott Shirley, 55, of Metropolis. "And he has love in his voice. You can feel it."



*LEFT: Rev. Frank Wagner walks to deliver a Sunday Church service at Menard Correctional Center in Chester, Illinois. RIGHT: Reverend Walker leading the church service.*



*Members of the choir sing and play during a Sunday church service at Menard Correctional Center in Chester. Photo by STEVE NAGY/BND*

## **Thankful for arrest**

Scott has served three years at Menard on drug charges. He expects to be released in 2016.

Scott insists God helped him get caught with meth-making supplies in his truck after he finished a sheet-rocking job at a Mount Vernon church.

"When they arrested me, I weighed 96 pounds," he said. "Jesus saved my life that night. I was strung out. I was dying."

At Wagner's service, Scott was one of four inmates who sat up front and sang in the praise choir, accompanied by a keyboard player.

Others swayed, clapped or answered "Uh-huh" to words of the song "No Greater Love."

"Jesus went to Calvary,

To save a wretch like you and me.

That's love,

That's love.



They hung him high,  
They stretched him wide.  
He hung his head,  
For me he died.  
That's love, that's love."

## **Guard turned minister**

Wagner is an oiler technician at U.S. Steel and a Christian singer with his own recording studio.

He makes the hour drive to Menard on the second and third Sundays of each month. Employees know him by name, but that doesn't exempt him from signing the visitor log or walking through a metal detector.

Wagner's kinship to prison inmates results partly from his childhood, which exposed him to temptations of the streets.

"I came from the hood (in East St. Louis)," he said. "But by the grace of God ... He protected me."

Wagner sang with an R&B band as a young man, then switched to gospel after an evangelist invited him to church. He later attended a local Bible college.



*A view of Rev. Frank Wagner and attendees at a Sunday church service at Menard Correctional Center in Chester, Illinois. Photo by STEVE NAGY/BND*

Wagner's first prison experience was working as a Menard corrections officer in the early '80s. He quit after a year to become a volunteer chaplain, preferring to preach rather than guard.

"I really don't know why, but when I went to Menard, the Lord burdened me to witness and share the gospel," he said.

## **Positive impact**

Wagner took a 15-year break from prison ministry in 1993, when he became pastor of Bible Baptist, a small independent, fundamentalist church.

He returned to Menard six years ago and recently won a state award for volunteerism.

One of his biggest fans is Kim Butler, who became the prison's first female warden in April. She's working to increase the number of classes, lectures and other volunteer-led programs for inmates.

"There is no doubt in my mind that it has a positive impact," she said.

Inmate Michael Loyde agrees. The 47-year-old former Chicago man sings with Scott in the praise choir at Wagner's services.

Michael has been incarcerated 19 years, convicted on a series of charges related to an attempted murder. He expects to be released in five months.



*Rev. Frank Wagner and attendees after a Sunday church service at Menard Correctional Center in Chester, Illinois. Photo by STEVE NAGY/BND*

Michael describes Wagner's sermons as relevant and easy to understand.

"He ministers to us as men in prison," Michael said. "He was a corrections officer, and he understands the mind-set of the prison system, the men who are locked up and the officers who are here."

## **Salvation for all**

Up to 50 inmates can attend Wagner's services, signing up in advance to be released from their cellblocks.

In a recent sermon, he emphasized that anyone can enter the "kingdom of God" by accepting Christ as their savior, no matter what they've done.

"You all know when you come to Jesus with your problems, your problems become his problems, and Jesus doesn't have problems," he said.

Wagner ends the same way he begins, with a round of applause.

He avoids getting too involved with inmates on a personal level, but occasionally gives encouragement or advice if they approach him one-on-one.

Wagner also visits churches and asks them to open their doors and hearts to parolees to help them succeed in the real world.

"He gives hope to the hopeless," Michael said. "He gives us a way out, like Christ gives us a way out. Prison is not the end. There's a better life after prison. That gives us hope for when we leave."



*Inmates walk back to their cells after their Sunday church service at Menard Correctional Center in Chester, Illinois. Photo by STEVE NAGY/BND*